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Contemporary poetry can be of value in the study of composition as a model of careful, concise, and effective use of language. Students can observe and, hopefully, imitate the poet's precise use of (1) vocabulary, (2) supporting materials, (3) introductions and conclusions, (4) transitional words and phrases, and (5) a variety of types of diction and of styles. The comparison of poetry and composition may lead students to believe that creative writing and composition are not necessarily separate pursuits. The works of several poets and a few anthologies are recommended for use in the classroom, and two poems and one short piece of fiction are briefly analyzed as examples. (WB)

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Poetry and Freshman Composition

MARVIN BELL

From: The Journal of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. February, 1964.

"To Science I bequeath my mortal part/If it contrives to leave its bones to art."—Nicholas Crome.

AS A COLLEGE FRESHMAN I spent a good deal of effort attempting to stir my composition instructor. I filled my writing with statements designed to make him angry, diction designed to make him laugh, conclusions designed to make him wonder. It seemed to me that he was the most bored man I knew, and that the classroom hours we spent together bored me only slightly more than they bored him.

My first year was almost over when I discovered that my composition instructor was, in fact, a practicing, published novelist. Still, that realization seemed to make little difference. Composition was one thing; creative writing was another. It was evident in my teacher's manner—uninspiring, mechanical and apparently concerned with lessons so fundamental and mechanical as to seem without significance—that he felt this division of kinds of writing to be proper.

I am not advocating the study of literature in place of the study of composition, a substitution often made in deference to the instructor's interests and comfort. The emphasis in such cases is usually placed on the content of that literature, with only brief references to its structures. The student is taught to read, and, secondarily as well as indirectly, to write. Creative writing and composition are still implied to be separate pursuits.

I am only advocating the study of literature in composition courses insofar as that study is focused on literary techniques applicable to the writing of compositions. The difference between such study and the more usual study of literature is, I admit, a matter of approach and emphasis. It is also a matter of degree.

In particular, the study of poetry seems to me to be worth time in the composition classroom. Of course, I look upon poetry as a form of composition. While the presence of accomplished composition in a poem is not usually enough to justify our calling it a significant or effective work of art, it is equally clear that significant and effective poems do incorporate techniques which are possible or necessary to effective compositions. If poetry and composition are in some ways dissimilar, they are, in other ways, quite similar. Generally speaking, the student who studies poetry becomes aware that poetry is not, despite certain definitions and credos which imply so, a spontaneous out-pouring of language. He learns that most, if not all, of the same techniques which go into the writing of a good poem are available and/or necessary to the writing of a decent composition. Indirectly, he concludes that some measure of art may reside in a composition, providing its author has become a good enough writer.

The study of poetry in the composition classroom seems to me wise for reasons additional to those related to the course image and consequent motivation:

Mr. Bell, a poet in the University of Iowa Workshop, has just been called into the Army and is stationed at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indianapolis.

1. Subtle effects, dependent on a sophisticated attitude and/or diction, are common in poetry. So the student learns to respect subtlety on aesthetic grounds, and investigates its structures.

2. Indeed, the necessity to be subtle is often the stimulus for a poem in the first place. Poems come about partly because the world is not subject to "either-or" analyses. And the ways in which poets attempt to express tentativeness, ambiguity or incoherence are myriad. Some poets attempt to express their thoughts or feelings by imitating randomness or incoherence. But I am not talking about bad poetry.

3. Many poems investigate the relationship between "objectivity" and "subjectivity" openly. In this respect, too, neither the world nor the poet's language is considered "either-or." How the poet moves from being as "objective" as possible to being frankly "subjective" is worth discussion in the composition classroom. The student becomes aware of objective-subjective relationships similar in kind to his own. Again, he is made aware of the level of mastery of language necessary if he hopes to express those relationships with emphatic precision.

4. Similarly, the student begins to realize that much of a poem's effectiveness depends on the poet's "proving" his (often tentative) assertions with reference to the "real" world. "Supporting material" is not an inaccurate term for these references, without which the poem is usually powerless.

5. Through an investigation of a poem's language and organization, the student becomes more aware of exactly how language can shape thought. He becomes even more aware of what is necessary to *intentional* communication. He is made aware, repeatedly, that no two words are connotative synonyms.

6. Poetry depends so often on concision for part of its effect that it is often defined in terms of concision. There are a number of other imperfect definitions of poetry. Nevertheless, most poetry does impress the student with the benefits and possibilities of concision.

7. Because poetry is generally concise, poems may be studied as if they were miniatures of more expanded writings, in some cases perhaps a shorthand for essays. A poem may be narrative, expository, critical or argumentative. It may be more than one of these in succession, or at once. Chances are, if it's an effective poem, it will have not only a beginning, middle and end, but also an introduction and a conclusion. That is, the student discovers why a poem begins and ends as it does. I submit that he can also learn a good deal about introductions and conclusions. For example, he discovers soon enough that the most effective introductions advance a piece, rather than simply begin it. Hopefully, he learns to handle such introductions and conclusions, which contain the irresistibility and emphasis more usually found in the middles of compositions than in their beginnings and endings. At least, he works toward them.

8. He learns that his experiences are rich with subject matter. The strong lyrical emphasis in contemporary poetry (as opposed to drama and narration), for example, has created many poems in which a single speaker reacts to his situation. The student who studies these poems becomes aware of any number of directions of thought, and origins of thought. There are ways, he finds out, in which something may be explored without first dividing it into three equal parts.

9. He discovers that, in poetry as in "composition," the most interesting and/or effective poems "say something." They develop a point, and, in general, make that point precisely. (Again, I am not saying that the point made may

not nearly always be a tentative or much-qualified one.)

10. More kinds of "styles," more sorts of diction can be investigated in terms of whole works in a given amount of time through the use of poetry than through the use of any other genre.

11. In the process of investigating the diction, and to a lesser extent the organization, of poems, the student learns to be a "close" reader. He discovers that function words are important, for example. Never again can he be quite so hasty, yet comfortable, in his own writing as he could be previously.

I do mean to emphasize contemporary poetry (as distinct, it should be noted, from much poetry included in "modern poetry" courses). It seems to me unfortunate that so many individuals do not realize that contemporary poets use contemporary diction. I suppose that such ignorance is due to our high school curricula, the creators of which have generally agreed that literature should be studied more or less in the order in which it was written. Thus, most students never quite find out about contemporary poetry. It seems to me wiser, in the composition classroom as well as in literature classrooms, to introduce the student to poetry through contemporary poems, which do not threaten to embarrass or confuse him with techniques and/or attitudes common to other times.

I admit, therefore, that the instructor who wishes to use poetry effectively in the composition class will have to go to some effort to track down appropriate poems. I am not sure how many composition instructors, generally teachers in English departments, subscribe to journals of contemporary poetry. At any rate, a few subscriptions to *Poetry* and related periodicals should provide plenty of material. Through such journals a familiarity with poets whose books would be useful may also be established. Obviously, not all poetry is equally useful in the composition classroom. And, conversely, some poems are particularly useful. Robert Creeley's handling of syntax is worth investigation in any class concerned with writing, for example. So is the diction in the work of Donald Justice, the development of thought in John Logan's longer poems, the relationship of the "objective" world to the "subjective" self in James Wright's new poetry, the colloquial language and rhythms in the work of Denise Levertov, etc. These poets, and many other good ones, are represented in several anthologies which might be of use. *New Poets of England and America,* edited by Donald Hall and Robert Pack, The World Publishing Company (Meridian Books); *Contemporary American Poetry,* edited by Donald Hall, Penguin Books; *The New American Poetry* 1945-1960, edited by Donald M. Allen, Grove Press are three such collections.

The use of such collections of poetry in the composition classroom seems to me to offer certain advantages over attempts to utilize fiction in a similar manner. Most obviously, the great concision by means of which poems accomplish what they attempt to accomplish allows the instructor to discuss a great many poems in detail in a relatively short time. The class investigates more *whole* pieces than it would be able to, if it concentrated exclusively on fiction.

Since I haven't the space to deal with many whole poems here, since every poem presents different techniques for penetration, and since composition instructors who feel themselves encouraged to search out contemporary poetry appropriate to the classroom are also individuals with backgrounds in close textural analysis, I am inclined to dispense with examples altogether. Still, the need to refer generally to particular poems at this point seems to be a good excuse for including at least some poetry in an article about poetry.

QUEUES/William Brady

On the onshore wind some gulls
queue up for a bit of bread:
an old man with a beard
a balding head

and a box of crumbled rolls
tosses crusts in the air.
To the gulls a fountain of food
seems neither rare

nor usual: the world
is a mystery in any case.
They take their orderly turns:
each, keeping place,

grabs a beakfull and blows
in a circle around to the rear
to patiently hover again.
I, standing where

they rise and gulp their grub
dislike the repeated motion
of greedy-guts who do not
ignore the ocean

but for now prefer free chow
to searching the littoral:
the ocean is always there;
stale bread may fail.

The ocean is always there.
While the birds themselves are mild,
can anyone rebel?
Beasts should go wild:

if gulls and balding men
are in league no one is free,
everything up in the air
is half at sea,

and you and I must go back
to endless circling, dine
on the crumby world and take
our place in line.

THE POET GROWS OLDER/
Charles Wright

It seemed, at the time, so indifferent an age that I recall nothing of it except an infinite tedium to be endured. I envied no one, nor dreamed of anything in particular as, unwillingly, I enveloped myself in all of the various disguises of a decent childhood. Nothing now comes to mind of ever embarking upon famous voyages to the usual continents; of making, from the dark rooms and empty houses of my imagination, brilliant escapes from unnatural enemies; or, on rainy winter afternoons in an attic, of inventing one plot or counterplot against a prince or a beast . . . Instead, it must have been otherwise.

I try to remember, nevertheless, something of all that time and place, sitting alone here in a room in the middle of spring, hearing the sound of a rain which has fallen for most of April, concerned with such different things, things done by others . . . I read of the aimless coups in the old dynasties from Africa to Afghanistan, and of new republics whose lists of war lords alone are enough to distress the Aryan tongue; of intricate, multiple rockets in search of a planet, soon, perhaps, to land in a country somewhere outside the pedestrian reach of reason; of the latest, old sailor's account of a water dragon seen bathing off the grizzled coast of Scotland . . . It is at times such as this, and without thinking, really, clothed in my goat's wool robes, that I steal a camel from an outlying Arabian stable, gather together my clansmen, and gallop for days along the miraculous caravan trails to Asia.

These poems are taken from *Iowa Workshop Poets*/1963 (copyright, Marvin Bell, 1963) a softbound anthology of twenty-five poems by members of the State University of Iowa Poetry Workshop during the school year 1962-63.

Both poems base their subjective elements on the real world. In the Brady poem, the poet makes an assertion based on observation. In the Wright prose-poem, the poet slides narratively between the outer world and his inner world. Neither poet ignores what might be called "supporting material," though one uses it primarily to provide interest and power, while the other uses it to validate his conclusions. Even so, the Brady assertion is a tentative one.

Whereas the Brady poem develops quite "directly," the Wright poem continually switches its time element and incorporates changes of pace and direction. Whereas the Brady piece moves from point to point largely on the basis of punctuation and frank declaration, the Wright piece goes to great lengths to extend many of its sentences. Its start is genuinely energetic.

I think it is fair to say that the Brady poem strains to be concise, while the Wright poem reveals no particular interest in concision. The diction of the former is, at times, quite colloquial, while the diction of the latter is deliberately ornate.

Other poems in the volume containing the Wright and Brady pieces are concerned with the relationship one poet feels with certain pine trees, a night spent in removing a live moth from the poet's ear, the absurdity of the context of a drowning, the death of Lamont Cranston, Huckleberry Finn's old age, executing a will, the birth of a daughter to one who preferred a son, an encounter between a Sixteenth Century Welsh poet and a hot-tongued Welsh fish-wife, and a man-made lake. The following poem from that volume seems to me particularly interesting in its mixing of description and rhetorical questions, its final expression of tentativeness, and its skillful use of sentence fragments and commas.

FERRY TO VICTORIA/Stephen Tudor

The dock at the foot
of Seattle. We passed
through the dank spaces
of the pier building
to the pleasure boat,
mounted with the crowd
to the deck. The sun
strove with the vapor
on Eliot Bay,
the skipper sounded
the horn, we sailed out.
Fair weather, light wind.

What had we to gain
going? The City
was place enough. Yet
here we thought things
better. Small boats crossed
our wake. Gulls followed
the trash off the stern.
You were light, a straw
woman on my arm.
We moved as straw moves
in the wind, in the
night, carried. The Sound
was chilly. We sat
in a gallery
inside, exchanging
caresses in that
crowd. I thought of days
before I knew you.
That was no time. These
passengers, were they
on the same boat? Were
they where we were?
They accompany us
merely, north to Victoria.

I am in favor of acquainting the composition student with as many kinds of subjects, developed and expressed in as many ways, as is possible. Poetry can be used to acquaint him with a great deal, in a relatively short time. At the same time, the effectiveness of certain techniques and the importance of particular concerns in composition are reinforced when he finds them similar to elements in so-called "creative" writing. The student winds up feeling that a concern for good writing, and the work necessary to accomplish it, have an importance substantiated in fact.

Of course, implying that the techniques and concerns of creative writing include those contained in the composition course could seriously affect the "image" of such freshman courses in the minds of both students and English teachers. Is there anyone who wishes to prevent that?

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